Intimate Partner Violence against Women: Exploring Intersections of Race Class and Gender

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Statement of the Research Problem

Although there is much empirical support for the conventional wisdom that abuse cuts across all social classes, data consistently indicates that while abusive behavior cuts a broad path, *it does not do so evenly* (Gelles, Lackner, & Wolfner, 1994; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Women from lower socioeconomic groups disproportionately experience intimate partner violence. Low-income and poverty are among the strongest, most consistent correlates of male-to-female domestic violence (Greenfield, et al., 1998; Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Most empirical studies that include a measure of socioeconomic status find a greater incidence of battering among those lower on such scales (Benson & Fox, 2004; Brown & Bassuk, 1997, Fox, Benson, Demaris, & Van Wyck, 2002; Moore, 1997; Schwartz, 1988). Studies of domestic violence prevalence among women on welfare have also consistently found rates considerably higher than rates for women in the general population (General Accounting Office, 1998; Raphael & Tolman, 1997; Tolman & Raphael, 2000). After reviewing the research literature, Schwartz (1988) noted it is difficult to come to any conclusion except that there is a relationship between measurable socioeconomic position indicators and the chance of victimization.

Despite extensive empirical evidence supporting a connection between socioeconomic position and intimate partner violence, there is a notable absence of a theoretical understanding of this relationship. Many studies of intimate partner violence are atheoretical, providing useful information about particular samples but limited in their generalizability (Riger & Staggs, 2004). Theories of domestic violence causation have not, to date, adequately incorporated economic variables (Meier, 1997; Raphael, 2001; Riger & Krieglstein, 2000). Without this theoretical understanding we are left with a collection of scattered research findings but no systematic way to comprehend the complexity of these issues (Riger & Krieglstein, 2000).

Research Background and Hypotheses

Many scholars and activists argue that economic justice is linked to ending domestic violence and that improving gender equality should be pursued as a strategy to reducing violence against women (e.g. Gelles, 1983; Hampton, Oliver & Magarian, 2003; Smith, 2005; Websdale & Johnson, 1997). From this perspective, violence would decrease when women's economic resources increase because, in gaining greater resources, women also gain more power. This view is consistent with a gender equality perspective and some social exchange theories influenced by bargaining theory from economics (Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Lundberg & Pollack, 1996). These exchange theorists emphasize how partners use their power over resources to bargain and argue that increasing a woman's economic resources empowers her to either bargain for a better situation for herself within the relationship or threaten to leave the relationship (England & Farkas, 1986; Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Gibson-Davis, Magnuson, Gennetian, & Duncan, 2005).

In contrast, other scholars have suggested that women's greater relative economic power increases men's likelihood of being abusive. This backlash hypothesis, also derived from exchange theory, is consistent with resource theorists that emphasize men's economic and symbolic control over household resources as a key to understanding intimate partner violence (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Goode, 1971; Kaukinen, 2004; McCloskey, 1996). Men have traditionally assumed positions of power by bringing in the majority, if not all, of the family's income. If a man is denied a position of power or if his role is threatened, he may be frustrated and may assert control by using violence (Hornung et al., 1981; Macmillan & Gartner, 1999; McCloskey, 1996). Any attempts to become economically more powerful are therefore interpreted as a challenge to the man's presumptive authority and compel the man to retaliate.

The purpose of this dissertation is twofold: (a) to test the utility of these two theoretical explanations of intimate partner violence that take both gender and socioeconomic factors into account and (b) to investigate possible racial and ethnic differences in these models. Previous research makes it clear that theorists of violence against women need to take into consideration both the effects of gender and class (Anderson, 1997; Kaukinen, 2004; Schwartz, 1988). Following an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991) I will also consider how the strength of these models differs across racial and ethnic minority groups, with a particular emphasis on African American women.

Hypothesis I: Backlash Hypothesis

1. Men who have fewer socioeconomic resources, compared with their female partners, are more likely to use physical violence and coercive control than men with resources equal to or greater than their female partners.

The backlash hypothesis is grounded in the resource approach to social exchange theory and predicts that women's greater relative economic power *increases* men's likelihood of being abusive. Men have traditionally assumed positions of power by bringing in the majority, if not all, of the family's income. If a man is denied a position of power or if his role is threatened, he may be frustrated and use violence to reestablish traditional masculinity and power at home when he is not fulfilling the breadwinner role, also a way to establish traditional masculinity (Anderson, 1997; Macmillan & Gartner, 1999; McCloskey; 1996). According to the backlash hypothesis, any attempts to become economically more powerful are interpreted as a challenge to the man's presumptive authority and compel the man to retaliate.

Hypothesis II: Bargaining Model

2. Women with greater economic resources are less likely to experience physical violence and coercive control within intimate partnerships.

The bargaining model predicts violence would decrease when women's economic resources increase because, in gaining greater resources, women also gain more power. Increasing a woman's economic resources empowers her to either bargain for a better situation for herself within the relationship or threaten to leave the relationship (England & Farkas, 1986; Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005).

Hypothesis III: Racial & Ethnic Differences

3a. Backlash Hypothesis: Men who have fewer socioeconomic resources, compared with their female partners, are more likely to use physical violence and coercive control than men with resources equal to or greater than their female partners.

3b. Bargaining Perspective: Women with greater economic resources are less likely to experience physical violence and coercive control within intimate partnerships.

Recent evidence has suggested that theoretical models with an emphasis on economic factors may not adequately explain the issues associated with intimate partner violence for African American women (Collier-Tenison, 2003). The final set of hypotheses will therefore examine whether the risk factors identified by resource and bargaining perspectives predict intimate partner violence differently for African American women.

Methodology

Data for this study were drawn from the national sample of the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study, an ongoing nationally representative birth cohort survey. The national sample includes 2,341 couples and was selected via a stratified random sample. Baseline measures were obtained from a cohort of new parents randomly selected in hospitals located across 16 large U.S. cities (population>200,000). Nonmarital births were oversampled relative to marital births (ratio, approximately 3:1). For the baseline survey, mothers were interviewed individually in the hospital after the birth of their babies; fathers were interviewed separately either in the hospital or at home.

The current analysis draws primarily from the three-year follow-up interview data. Three-year follow-up interviews were conducted between April 2001 and December 2003. Analyses is limited to couples that were romantically involved and where both the woman and man completed the three year follow-up interview (N=2,206). Listwise deletion was utilized to address missing violence data and reduced the analytic sample to 1,800 couples (76.9% of the full national sample).

For this study, intimate partner violence is defined as either physical violence or coercive control. Physical violence questions were drawn from the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, et al., 1996), while measures of coercive control were drawn the Effects of Violence on Work and Family Project (Lloyd, 1997). Physical violence was measured by the women's report of how frequently (often, sometimes, or never) that their child's father: (1) "slaps or kicks you" and (2) "hits you with a fist or an object that could hurt you". Following the approaches of Whitaker et. al (2007) and Charles and Perreira (in press), I dichotomized physical violence to indicate violence (often and sometimes) or no violence (never). Measures of coercive control focused on controlling behaviors and were obtained from women's reports of how frequently (often, sometimes, or never) their child's father: (1) "tries to keep you from seeing or talking with your friends or family," (2) "tries to prevent you from going to work or school," and (3) "withholds money, makes you ask for it, or takes your money." Coercive control questions were scored according to the method used by Whitaker and colleagues (2007) to indicate coercive control (sometimes or often) or no coercive control (never) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.759 for the current sample).

A series of control variables were included to account for factors that previous research has suggested may be associated with an increased risk of intimate partner violence. Control variables included age (in years), race/ethnicity (Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, non-Hispanic White, and Other), marital status (married, cohabitating, and other), Man's alcohol and/or drug dependence (yes or no) and young children in the household (number). Socioeconomic measures included education (highest level completed), employment (in past 30 days and past year), home ownership, and income (in dollars). Participants were considered to have experienced material hardship (yes or no) due to a lack of money during the preceding 12 months if they had experienced any of the following: received free food or meals, did not pay rent or mortgage, were evicted from home, did not pay gas/oil/electricity bill, had gas, oil, or electric service turned off, had telephone disconnected, or stayed in shelter, car or

abandoned building. Economic status compatibilities measures were utilized to examine the connection between men's and women's relative economic contributions.

Bivariate analysis was conducted with Pearson's chi-squared test statistic and bivariate logistic regression. Hierarchical logistic regression models were used to determine the impact of socioeconomic factors on the risk of physical violence and coercive control. Analysis is conducted separately for the full sample (n=1800) and the subset of African American women (n=703).

Results

Women in the sample ranged in age from 17 to 48 years (M=28.2, SD=6.07) while men's ranged in age from 18 to 71 years (M=30.8, SD=7.30). In regard to race/ethnicity, 39.1% of the mothers reported they were African American (703), 30.1% Hispanic/Latino (541), and 30.9% non-Hispanic White (556). Among men in the survey, 40.7% reported they were African American (733), 28.7% Hispanic/Latino (517), 27.5% non-Hispanic White (495), and 3.1% other races or ethnicities (55). In 85.7% of the couples, both the women and men reported the same race/ethnicity. About 41% of the women in the sample are married to the focal child's father, while 25% are cohabitating with the focal child's father. For the women, each household had an average of 1.47 young children (below age 5) per household.

A small proportion of women reported having experienced recent physical abuse (7.5%). Nearly twice as many women reported recent experiences of coercive control (14.1%). Women reporting physical violence or coercive control were not significantly different in regard to race/ethnicity from women reporting no violence.

Hypothesis I: Physical Violence & Backlash Hypothesis.

To analyze the backlash hypothesis, control variables and the income status compatibility measures were entered hierarchically in two steps. The overall model met criteria for statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 100.336$, df = 8, $p < .001$). The Nagelkerke R^2 value indicated that approximately 13.1% of the variance in physical violence is accounted for by the model. In the backlash model, marital status and the unemployment status comparisons remained significant at the 0.05 level. For married couples, the odds of physical violence was reduced by 89.6% Exp[-2.265] = .104; p<.001). When the man was unemployed a greater number of weeks compared to the woman, the odds of physical violence decreased approximately 41.2% Exp[-.530] = .588; p= .018). In addition, when both partners were unemployed the same number of weeks the odds of physical violence were reduced by 48.0% Exp[.653] =.521; p= .007). Race/ethnicity, age, and number of children in the household were not statistically significant predictors of physical violence in this model.

Hypothesis II: Physical Violence & Bargaining Model.

For the bargaining model, physical violence was regressed on the following variables: age, marital status, man's race/ethnicity, number of children in the household,

woman worked more than one job, man worked more than one job, number of weeks the man was unemployed, material hardship, woman's homeownership, status compatibility measure for weeks unemployed. The variables were entered in two hierarchal blocks (Block 1: control variables including age, marital status, race/ethnicity, and number of children in the household; Block 2: economic measures including woman worked more than one job, man worked more than one job, number of weeks the man was unemployed, material hardship, homeownership, status compatibility measure for number of weeks unemployed). The bargaining model met the criteria for statistical significance (χ^2 = 126.900, df = 12, p < .001). For the full model, the Negelkerke R^2 was 0.165 indicating that the model accounts for about 16.5% of the variance in physical violence. In the bargaining model three variables remained significant at the 0.05 level. The odds of physical violence were 86.4% lower for couples who are married Exp[-.1.994] = .136; p< .001). Material hardship due to a lack of money was significantly related to physical violence Exp[.670] = 1.954; p< .001). Material hardship in the previous year was associated with 95.4% greater odds of physical violence. The status compatibility measure for the number of weeks unemployed in the previous year was significant (p= .010). When the man and woman were unemployed the same number of weeks, the odds of physical violence *decreased* by 49.6% Exp[-.684] = .504; p= .006). When the man was unemployed more weeks than the woman, the odds of physical violence *decreased* by 43.6% Exp[-.573] = .564; p= .012). Working multiple jobs and homeownership were marginally significant predictors of physical violence (p <.10). For women who worked more than one job, the odds of physical violence increased approximately 57.4% Exp[.453] = 1.574; p= .018). When men worked more than one job, the odds of physical violence increased approximately 52.9% Exp[.425] = 1.529; p= .066). Women's homeownership was associated with a 51.9% reduction in the odds of physical violence Exp[-.732] = .481; p= .052).

Hypotheses III: Physical Violence & Racial/ Ethnic Differences

3a. Backlash Hypothesis:

This model closely follows the backlash model that was developed for the full sample and utilizes data from only the African American women in the sample (n=703). To analyze the backlash hypothesis, control variables and status compatibility variables were entered hierarchically in two blocks (Block 1: woman's age, marital status, and number of children in the household; Block 2: unemployment status compatibility variables). The backlash model met the criteria for statistical significance (χ^2 = 26.169, df = 5, p < .001). The Nagelkerke R^2 value indicated that approximately 6.0% of the variance in physical violence is accounted for by the model. Table 3.24 provides a summary of the contribution of the independent variables. In the full model, the control variable marital status was the only variable that remained significant at the 0.05 level (Exp-1.255] = .285; p = .020).

3b. Bargaining Perspective

Following the bargaining model developed for the full sample, physical violence was regressed on the following variables: age, marital status, number of children in the household, woman worked more than one job, man worked more than one job, number of weeks the man was unemployed, material hardship, homeownership, status compatibility measure for weeks unemployed. The bargaining model met the criteria for statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 32.918$, df = 9, p = .001). The Nagelkerke R^2 was 0.104 indicating that the model accounts for about 10.4% of the variance in physical violence. In the bargaining model two variables remained significant at the 0.05 level. The odds of physical violence was 67.7% lower for couples who are married (Exp-1.130] = .323; p = .044). Material hardship due to a lack of money was significantly related to physical violence (Exp(1.005) =2.731; p = .001). Material hardship in the previous year was associated with 173.1% greater odds of physical violence. The status compatibility measure for the number of weeks unemployed in the previous year was not statistically significant (p = .125).

Hypothesis I: Coercive Control & Backlash Hypothesis.

For the backlash model coercive control was regressed on the following independent variables: women's age, marital status, man's race ethnicity, alcohol/drug dependency and unemployment status compatibility. The independent variables were entered hierarchically in two blocks. The first block contained the control variables (women's age, marital status, man's race ethnicity), and block two added the status compatibility measure. The backlash model for coercive control met criteria for statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 110.731$, df = 8, p < .001). The Nagelkerke R^2 value indicates that approximately 10.7% of the variance in physical violence is accounted for by the model. However, only two control variables remained significant in the full model at the 0.05 level. The odds of coercive control were 79.8% lower for couples who are married (Exp[-1.598] = .202; p < .001). When the man was dependent on alcohol and/or drugs, the odds of coercive control are increased approximately 92.6% (Exp(656) = 1.926; p=.035). Unemployment comparisons were not statistically significant predictors of coercive control.

Hypothesis II: Coercive Control & Bargaining Model.

Coercive control was regressed on the following variables: age, marital status, man's race/ethnicity, alcohol/drug dependence, woman's education, number of weeks the man was unemployed, homeownership, material hardship, and status compatibility measure for weeks unemployed. The variables were entered in two hierarchal blocks. The bargaining model met criteria for statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 135.054$, df = 12, p < .001). The Nagelkerke R^2 was 0.130 indicating that the model accounts for about 13.0% of the variance in coercive control. Five variables remained significant at the 0.05 level. The odds of coercive control were 74.5% lower for couples who were married (Exp(-1.366) = .255; p < .001). The odds of coercive control are approximately 101.7% greater when the man is dependent on drugs or alcohol (Exp(.701) = 2.017; p = .025). Women's

education was significantly associated with coercive control (Exp(-.096) = .909; p = .021). An increase in educational attainment was associated with approximately a 9.1% reduction in the odds of coercive control. Women's homeownership was associated with a 38.4% reduction in the odds of physical violence (Exp(-.485) = .616; p = .041). Material hardship due to a lack of money was significantly related to coercive control (b = .492, Exp(B) =1.635) (Exp(.492) = 1.635; p=.001). Material hardship in the previous year was associated with 63.5% greater odds of coercive control.

Hypothesis III: Coercive Control & Racial/ Ethnic Differences

3a. Backlash Hypothesis

For this model coercive control was regressed on the following independent variables: women's age, marital status, alcohol/drug dependency, and unemployment status compatibility. The independent variables were entered hierarchically in two blocks. The first block contained the control variables (women's age and marital status), and block two added the status compatibility measure. The backlash model met criteria for statistical significance (χ^2 = 22.035, df = 5, p = .001). The Nagelkerke R^2 value indicates that approximately 5.5% of the variance in physical violence is accounted for by this model. In the full model, however only two control variables remained significant at the 0.05 level. The odds of physical violence were decreased by approximately 57.6% for couples who were married (Exp[-.858] = .424; p = .013). The male partner's drug/alcohol dependence was also significantly related to increased odds of violence (Exp[1.189] = 3.283; p = .007).

3b. Bargaining Perspective

Coercive control was regressed on the following variables: age, marital status, drug/alcohol dependence, women's education, number of weeks the man was unemployed, material hardship, homeownership, and the status compatibility measure for weeks unemployed. The Nagelkerke R^2 was 0.073 indicating that the model accounts for about 7.3% of the variance in coercive control. Two variables remained significant at the 0.05 level. The odds of physical violence was 242.8% greater when the man was dependent on alcohol or drugs (Exp[1.232] = 3.428; p = .006). Women's level of education was a statistically significant predictor of coercive control. Each increase in education level was associated with a decrease in the odds of violence by 14.0% (Exp[-.150] = .860; p = .024). For the full model, marital status was marginally significant (p<.10). For parents who were married the odds of coercive control decreased by about 48.6% (Exp[-.665 = .514; p = .067).

Utility for Social Work Practice

In the full sample Backlash model, employment status consistency measures were significantly associated with physical violence, although it was not in the direction predicted by the backlash hypothesis. In couples where the man was unemployed either more or the same amount as the woman, the risk of physical

violence *decreased*. These results do not provide support for the backlash hypothesis. In contrast, these results suggest employment may serve as a protective factor for physical abuse. These findings are similar to the results of Kalmuss and Straus (1990) whose analysis of the National Survey of Family Violence indicated that employed women had lower rates of violent victimization. Farmer and Tiefenthaler (1997) found similar results in their analysis of data from the Domestic Violence Experience in Omaha, Nebraska (1986-1987) and the Charlotte North Carolina Spouse Replication Project (1987-1989). Their results indicated that women who are employed experienced fewer incidences of physical abuse regardless of their partner's employment status. When focused on the African American women in the sample, the results of the backlash model differed from the results for the full sample. The blocks containing the unemployment status comparison variables were not significantly associated with physical violence.

The Bargaining model for physical violence accounted for approximately 16.5% of the variance in physical violence explained in the full sample model and 10.4% of the variance in the subset of African American women. In the bargaining model, both material hardship and the unemployment status consistency measures remained significant in the full sample model. For couples experiencing material hardship, the odds of violence was nearly two times as high as it was for couples not experiencing material hardship. In regard to unemployment status comparisons, for couples where the man was unemployed either more or the same amount as the woman, the risk of violence was *decreased*. These results provide support for the bargaining model from social exchange theory.

The results of the backlash models for the full sample and the subset of African American women indicated that employment status comparisons were not significantly related to coercive control. For the Bargaining model, women's education, home ownership and material hardship were significantly associated with coercive control for the full sample. Both education and homeownership were protective factors that were associated with a decreased risk of violence, while material hardship was associated with an increased risk of violence. When focused on the subset of African American women, the blocks containing economic indicators were not statistically significant. These results suggest that while economic factors may play a role in coercive control, the influence is not as great for coercive control as compared to physical violence, particularly in the case of African American women.

Overall, these findings are consistent with the bargaining model from social exchange theory and support the notion that improving women's economic position should be pursued as one strategy to reduce the incidence and prevalence of violence against women. Although little evidence supported the backlash hypothesis, results suggest that in some situations men's frustrations with their performance in the labor force can increase the risk of abuse. Evidence further suggests that the strength of these results differ across racial/ethnic groups. Results were less significant for African American women and suggest that there are other factors that impact the risk of physical violence and coercive control, particularly for Black women.

This study provides particular insights on how economic justice and gender equality should be pursued as a strategy to reduce violence against women. This work

goes beyond simply testing theory and helps to reformulate and clarify exchange theories of intimate partner violence. Results suggest that theoretical models emphasizing economic factors may not adequately explain the issues associated with physical violence for African American women. These results are important both in understanding the etiology of abuse and in designing effective screening and treatment strategies for intimate partner violence.

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